

Research Proposal

A research proposal is an overall plan, scheme, structure and strategy designed to obtain answers to the research questions or problems that constitute your research project. A research proposal should outline the various tasks you plan to undertake to fulfill your research objectives, test hypotheses (if any) or obtain answers to your research questions. It should also state your reasons for undertaking the study. Broadly, a research proposal's main function is to detail the operational plan for obtaining answers to your research questions.

All research endeavors, in both **qualitative** and **quantitative** research, in every academic and professional field are preceded by a research proposal. It informs your academic supervisor or potential research contract provider about your conceptualization of the total research process. In any academic field, your research proposal will go through a number of committees for approval. Unless it is approved by all of them, you will not be able to start your research. Hence, it is important for you to study closely what constitutes a research proposal.

You need to write a research proposal whether your research study is quantitative or qualitative and in both cases you use a similar structure. The main difference is in the proposed procedures and methodologies for undertaking the research endeavour. When providing details for different parts of the research proposal, for quantitative studies, **you will detail quantitative methods, procedures and models and, for qualitative studies, your proposed process will be based upon methods and procedures** that form the qualitative research methodology.

Contents of a research proposal

- Topic
- Introduction
- Theoretical framework
- Conceptual framework
- Hypotheses
- Objectives or research questions
- Research instrument(s)
- Sampling design and sample size;
- Data processing procedures;
- Proposed chapters
- Problems and limitations
- References and bibliography

A research proposal should communicate the above contents clearly and specifically in such a way that anyone going through it should be able to undertake all tasks in the same manner as you would have. It should also:

- enable you to return to the proposal for your own guidance in decision making at different stages of the research process;
- convince your research supervisor or a reviewer that your proposed methodology is meritorious, valid, appropriate and workable in terms of obtaining answers to your research questions or objectives.

The **theoretical framework** for your study must emerge from this literature review and must have its grounding in empirical evidence. As a rule, the literature review includes:

- a **conceptual framework**, and theoretical and empirical information about the main issues under study;
- some of the major research findings relating to your topic, research questions raised in the literature and gaps identified by previous researchers.

Your literature review should also raise issues relating to the methodology you are proposing. For example, it may examine how other studies operationalised the major variables of relevance to your study and may include a critique of methodology relevant to your study. The critiques of methods and procedures should be included under their respective headings. For example, a critique of the sampling design you adopt should be included under ‘sampling’ or a critique to the study design should be discussed under ‘study design’.

Note that the suggested research proposal structure does not contain a section entitled ‘survey of the literature’ or ‘literature review’. This is because references to the literature should be integrated with your arguments conceptually rather than chronologically and should become a part of all the aspects of your research report from problem conceptualisation to conclusions. The literature should be reviewed under main themes that emerge from your reading of the literature and should be included in the ‘introduction’ and ‘the problem’. Issues identified in the literature to do with research methodology and problems pertinent to the various aspects of research procedures should be discussed under their respective headings. For example, issues pertaining to the study design under ‘study design’, issues relating to sampling under ‘sampling’ and the literature pertaining to the research instrument under the ‘measurement procedure’.

Preamble/introduction

The proposal should start with an introduction to include some of the information listed below. Remember that some of the contents suggested in this section may not be relevant to certain studies, so use your discretion in selecting only what is pertinent to your study. In writing this section, the literature review is of central importance as it serves two main functions:

1. It acquaints you with the available literature in the area of your study, thereby broadening your knowledge base.
2. It provides you with information on the methods and procedures other people have used in similar situations and tells you what works and what does not.

Start with a very broad perspective of the main subject area, before gradually narrowing the focus to the central problem under investigation. In doing so, cover the following aspects of your study area:

- an overview of the main area under study;
- a historical perspective (development, growth, etc.) pertinent to the study area;
- philosophical or ideological issues relating to the topic;
- trends in terms of prevalence, if appropriate;
- major theories, if any;
- the main issues, problems and advances in the subject area under study;
- important theoretical and practical issues relating to the central problem under study;
- the main findings relating to the core issue(s).

The problem

Having provided a broad introduction to the area under study, now focus on issues relating to its central theme, identifying some of the gaps in the existing body of knowledge. Identify some of the main unanswered questions. Here some of the main research questions that you would like to answer through your study should also be raised, and a rationale and relevance for each should be provided. Knowledge gained from other studies and the literature about the issues you are proposing to investigate should be an integral part of this section.

Specifically, this section should:

- identify the issues that are the basis of your study;
- specify the various aspects of/perspectives on these issues;
- identify the main gaps in the existing body of knowledge;
- raise some of the main research questions that you want to answer through your study;
- identify what knowledge is available concerning your questions, specifying the differences of opinion in the literature regarding these questions if differences exist;
- develop a rationale for your study with particular reference to how your study will fill the identified gaps.

Objectives of the study

In this section include a statement of both your study's main and sub objectives. Your main objective indicates the central thrust of your study whereas the sub objectives identify the specific issues you propose to examine.

The objectives of the study should be clearly stated and specific in nature. Each sub objective should delineate only one issue. Use action-oriented verbs such as 'to determine', 'to find out' and 'to ascertain' in formulating sub objectives, which should be numerically listed. If the objective is to test a hypothesis, you must follow the convention of hypothesis formulation in wording the specific objectives.

Hypotheses to be tested

A hypothesis is a statement of your assumptions about the prevalence of a phenomenon or about a relationship between two variables that you plan to test within the framework of the study. If you are going to test hypotheses, list them in this section.

When formulating a hypothesis, you have an obligation to draw conclusions about it in the text of the report. Hypotheses have a particular style of formulation. You must be acquainted with the correct way of wording them. In a study, you may have as many hypotheses as you want to test. However, it is *not* essential to have a hypothesis in order to undertake a study – you can conduct a perfectly satisfactory study without formulating a hypothesis.

Sampling

Under this section of the proposal include the following:

- the size of the sampling population (if known) and from where and how this information will be obtained;
- the size of the sample you are planning to select and your reasons for choosing this size;
- an explanation of the sampling design you are planning to use in the selection of the sample (simple random sampling, stratified random sampling, quota sampling, etc.).

Analysis of data

In general terms, describe the strategy you intend to use for data analysis. Specify whether the data will be analysed manually or by computer. For computer analysis, identify the program and where appropriate the statistical procedures you plan to perform on the data. For quantitative studies also identify the main variables for cross-tabulation.

For qualitative studies, describe how you plan to analyse your interviews or observation notes to draw meanings from what your respondents have said about issues discussed or observation notes made. One of the common techniques is to identify main themes, through analysing the contents of the information gathered by you in the field. You first need to decide whether you want to analyse this information manually or use a computer program for the purpose.

There are three ways to proceed with content analysis:

1. From your field notes develop a framework of your write-up and as you go through your notes directly integrate that information within the structure developed. If you adopt this method, you need to be reasonably clear about the structure. It does not mean that you cannot develop the structure as you go on analysing; still, a clear vision will be of immense help in slotting information gathered in the field by you into the write-up.
2. The second method is that you transcribe your field notes to be read by you over and over again to identify the main themes. These themes become the basis of your write-up.
3. There are computer programs such as *SPSS* specifically designed to handle descriptive data. You may prefer to use one of these programs. These programs are also based

upon the principle of content analysis. The only difference is that instead of your searching manually, they identify where a particular text identifying the theme appears.

Structure of the report

As clearly as possible, state how you intend to organise the final report. In organising your material for the report, the specific objectives of your study are of immense help. Plan to develop your chapters around the main themes of your study. The title of each chapter should clearly communicate the main thrust of its contents.

The first chapter, possibly entitled 'Introduction', should be an overall introduction to your study, covering most of your project proposal and pointing out deviations, if any, from the original plan.

The second chapter should provide some information about the study population itself – that is, some of its socioeconomic–demographic characteristics. The main aim of this chapter is to give readers some background on the population from which you collected the information. The second chapter, therefore, may be entitled, 'Socioeconomic–demographic characteristics of the study population' or 'The study population' or any other title that communicates this theme to readers. Titles for the rest of the chapters will vary from study to study but, as mentioned, each chapter should be written around a main theme. Although the wording of chapter titles is an individual choice, each must communicate the main theme of the chapter. In developing these themes the specific objectives of the study should be kept in the front of your mind.

If your study is qualitative, the main issues identified during data collection and analysis stages should become the basis of developing chapters. Having developed significant issues, the next step is to organise the main themes under each issue and develop a structure that you will follow to communicate your findings to your readers.

Problems and limitations

This section should list any problems you think you might encounter concerning, for example, the availability of data, securing permission from the agency/organisation to carry out the study, obtaining the sample, or any other aspect of the study.

You will not have unlimited resources and as this may be primarily an academic exercise, you might have to do less than an ideal job. However, it is important to be aware of – and communicate – any limitations that could affect the validity of your conclusions and generalizations.

Here, *problems* refer to difficulties relating to logistical details, whereas *limitations* designate structural problems relating to methodological aspects of the study. In your opinion the study design you chose may not be the best but you might have had to adopt it for a number of reasons. This is classified as a limitation of the study. This is also true for sampling or measurement procedures. Such limitations should be communicated to readers.

Conclusion

The conclusion reiterates the importance or significance of your proposal and provides a brief summary of the entire study. This section should be only one or two paragraphs

long, emphasizing why the research problem is worth investigating, why your research study is unique, and how it should advance existing knowledge.

Someone reading this section should come away with an understanding of:

- Why the study should be done,
- The specific purpose of the study and the research questions it attempts to answer,
- The decision to why the research design and methods used were chosen over other options,
- The potential implications emerging from your proposed study of the research problem, and
- A sense of how your study fits within the broader scholarship about the research problem.

Citations

As with any scholarly research paper, you must cite the sources you used in composing your proposal. In a standard research proposal, this section can take two forms, so consult with your professor about which one is preferred.

1. **References** -- lists only the literature that you actually used or cited in your proposal.
2. **Bibliography** -- lists everything you used or cited in your proposal, with additional citations to any key sources relevant to understanding the research problem.

In either case, this section should testify to the fact that you did enough preparatory work to make sure the project will complement and not duplicate the efforts of other researchers. Start a new page and use the heading "References" or "Bibliography" centered at the top of the page. Cited works should always use a standard format that follows the writing style advised by the discipline of your course [i.e., education=APA; history=Chicago, etc] or that is preferred by your professor. This section normally does not count towards the total page length of your research proposal.